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Writers and Their Work: No. 63

CHARLES WILLIAMS

by

JOHN HEATH-STUBBS

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THE BRITISH COUNCIL
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Charles Williams (1886–1945) was a poet, a novelist, a critic—and a tremendous talker. His fancy coruscated; his wit stimulated; his energy was communicated to those around him. In the ten years since his untimely death, his spell has been exercised through his books to an ever-widening circle of readers, and an assessment of his whole performance has become necessary. Mr. Heath-Stubbs examines his work in all its main directions. His conclusion—that Williams was 'a major poet'—is arrived at by a close analysis, which holds the attention by its clarity and living sympathy. In the *Darkling Plain* and other published works, Mr. Heath-Stubbs has proved his quality as an interpreter: in this essay he has done lasting service to the reputation of one whose work will be increasingly studied.

The bibliography, specially compiled for this study, is by Mr. Linden Huddlestone, who has in preparation a book on the poetry of Charles Williams.

Bibliographical Series
of Supplements to 'British Book News'
on Writers and Their Work

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GENERAL EDITOR
Bonamy Dobrée

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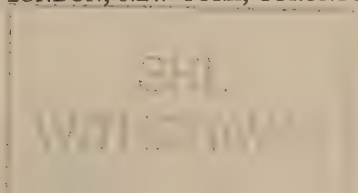

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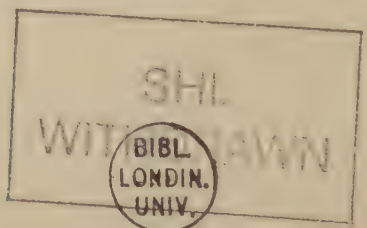

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¶ Charles Walter Stansby Williams was born in London on 20 September 1886. He died at Oxford on 15 May 1945.

CHARLES WILLIAMS

I

CHARLES WILLIAMS died in 1945, yet, even after the lapse of some ten years, it is very difficult to arrive at a balanced estimate of his place in modern English literature. Criticism has, indeed, largely neglected him; and in particular it has neglected that part of his work, the later poems, by which he would certainly have wished primarily to be judged. There appear, however, to be signs that interest in his work is steadily growing, especially among the younger generation, though it is probably for his prose fiction that he is best known. His novels are 'metaphysical thrillers', in which the supernatural always plays a prominent part. They belong, broadly, to the same literary genre as the stories of Sheridan Le Fanu (in *Through a Glass Darkly*), Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood, and M. R. James. This is a tradition of English writing (an offshoot, really, of the earlier tradition of the 'Gothic' romance, of which the detective story is another offshoot) which, whatever its entertainment value, criticism does not feel called upon to take very seriously. Witchcraft, converse between the living and the spirits of the dead, a magic stone that can transport you at will in time and space, the images of the Tarot pack, a modern quest for the Holy Grail—these, surely, are things which may entertain our fancy, even produce a pleasurable shudder of a winter's evening—but have nothing to do with our rational, day to day experience, and hence cannot form the material of serious literature.

Yet the reader, encountering the properties I have mentioned above in the pages of a novel by Charles Williams, quickly becomes conscious of a factor which distinguishes his work from that of other writers of this kind. The supernatural is being taken seriously, and is being brought disconcertingly close to our own experience. Magic is seen, not as something which may provide a fanciful escape from a dull reality, but, at least, as the image of something which is part

of the world as we know it. It is, in these stories, the abuse of a real spiritual power for selfish ends. Hence, it holds the possibility of real damnation, just as does the abuse of other forms of spiritual power—love, for instance, or poetry.

Charles Williams believes in the supernatural. But his mind is at the same time highly rational, even (in a sense) sceptical. However bizarre the events that occur in his novels may be, they are always, essentially, logical, and subject to the same laws which apply to our everyday experience. And the people to whom they occur are everyday people—middle-class people for the most part, who work in shops and offices, or as professional men or clergymen, and who live in London, its suburbs, and the home-counties. Charles Williams himself lived and worked among such people (as an employee of the Oxford University Press's London Office, and a lecturer in the City Literary Institute) and he believed in their fundamental decencies. It is among such people that he has mostly found his readers rather than among the 'intellectuals' (whom he tended to distrust). His novels belong, it may be, to 'middlebrow' literature. They were written partly, it would appear, for entertainment, partly to bring in money. But in turning, only half-seriously, to the novel form, Charles Williams employed ideas which he held with profound seriousness. These ideas are most fully developed in his other prose-writings—literary critical, historical, and religious in character, and above all, in his poetry and plays. The corpus of his published work is large, and some acquaintance with its varied aspects is necessary if we are to gain a correct estimate of his stature. But primarily, he was a poet. All his work is to be understood in terms of his conception of the poet's experience, and its relationship to spiritual truth.

As a poet, he stood, in some sense, apart from the age in which he lived, in much the same way as William Blake did from his. This was due (as also in Blake's case) to his overriding spiritual preoccupations:

> The young poets studied precision;
> Taliessin remembered the soul.

Fundamentally, he was a traditionalist, wishing to continue the great tradition of Dante, Milton and Wordsworth, but also of the Metaphysicals. This, together with his distrust of the highbrows, for long made him suspicious of what was being done by modern poets, and he was late in finding a style really adequate to his thought. His early volumes, such as *Poems of Conformity* (1917) and *Divorce* (1920), show great virtuosity of style, yet it is always imitative. There are pastiches of Herrick, Rochester, and other seventeenth-century poets, some poems with a somewhat pre-Raphaelite colouring, and others again which show the strong influence of the early Yeats, Abercrombie, Chesterton, and perhaps Kipling. This technical virtuosity is matched by an equal intellectual power. Many of his leading ideas and themes are already developed in these early volumes—but the result is hardly ever quite satisfactory as poetry. We feel that the poet is limiting himself (as did Bridges, whom Williams admired, and the Georgians) by attachment to false, and static conceptions of poetic tradition. The living tradition of English poetry was, at the period these poems were written, directing itself into very different channels. Under the guidance of Ezra Pound, Eliot, and the later Yeats, the younger poets were learning to accommodate their rhythms to colloquial speech, and to discard the overworked associations of romantic diction.

Yet, even had he been prepared to adopt it, this colloquializing tendency, this re-affirmation of the 'low' style, would not have served Charles Williams's purpose. He aimed at a poetry of epic scope, using the traditional British theme of the Arthurian legend. The 'Taliessin' poems are, in fact, a series of epic odes (rather like the classic Greek odes of Pindar or Bacchylides) using this mythological material, as a symbol of spiritual experience, in somewhat the same way as the mythology of Blake's Prophetic Books is employed. Some of its episodes he treated earlier in the style of Chesterton—quite an inadequate one to his purpose. But with the publication of *Taliessin through Logres* (1938)

Williams emerged, in middle life, as a mature poet. The style of these poems is wholly original, and fully as 'modern' in its own way, as that of T. S. Eliot.[1] But whereas the latter, actuated partly by a negative mysticism, stripped his language of all ornaments to an ascetic bareness, Williams, with his 'affirmative' approach to the same beliefs as Eliot held, required a language rich with imagery, ceremonial and hieratic. It is remote, indeed, from common speech, but it is equally remote from the enervated romantic diction of the Georgians.[2]

Nothing could be more unlike the 'social realist' poetry then in fashion. The poetic canons of the thirties are classically (and admirably) illustrated in Michael Roberts's *Faber Book of Modern Verse*; and in the original edition of this anthology, Charles Williams finds no place.[3] But before the decade was out, a certain reaction against these canons began to become apparent.

Though quite independently of any knowledge of Williams's work, younger poets like George Barker and Dylan Thomas began to write in a style which did not eschew a certain romantic rhetoric. There was also a growing feeling, accentuated later by the experience of the war (which drove people back to their inner resources), that a merely 'social-realist' interpretation of experience was inadequate for poetry.

Younger poets became interested in mythological and religious symbolism, as a means of expressing areas of experience inaccessible to the intellect alone. Among some of these, Williams began to find readers. His influence is discernible in the work of Sidney Keyes and Vernon Watkins, and, in another way, in that of Anne Ridler and Norman

[1] It is necessary to make this point, since so intelligent a critic as Mr. Kenneth Allott in his preface to the *Penguin Anthology of Modern Verse* classes Charles Williams with Walter de la Mare, as one who continued to write in an out-moded style.

[2] It does, however, perhaps owe something to Hopkins, whose poems Williams had edited, but it is not 'Hopkinsese'.

[3] One poem of Williams, *The Crowning of Arthur*, is included in the latest edition, revised by Anne Ridler.

Nicholson. These last were not attracted to Williams's style, but sharing his religious faith, were impressed by the way in which he gave significance to the apparently trivial, and to everyday relationships.

Among poets of Williams's own generation, T. S. Eliot has expressed his interest in Williams's work, and the influence of the latter's ideas in the *Four Quartets* and *The Cocktail Party*[1] is at least to be suspected. W. H. Auden, who by the end of the war had reached a position of Christian orthodoxy, has been certainly influenced by his reading of Charles Williams. *The Descent of the Dove* is quoted in the notes to *New Year Letter*. The image of a landscape corresponding to the human body, in *The Age of Anxiety*, derives from the scheme of *Taliessin through Logres*, while *Memorial for the City*, in *Nones*, is in direct imitation of Williams's mature style.

I mention this influence of Williams on other writers, in order to suggest that he need no longer be regarded as a figure eccentric to the age, but as a thinker and poet of stature, to be reckoned with seriously. It is to the 'Taliessin' poems that I wish primarily to direct the reader's attention. But these, as I have already said, present considerable difficulty. They are to be interpreted with reference to Williams's leading ideas, and these are most readily deducible from a consideration of his prose writings.

II

I have mentioned above Charles Williams's relationship to T. S. Eliot. It may be helpful if we regard them, in some sense, as complementary figures. Both are poets of a religious experience which verges on the mystical. Both were able to formulate that experience in terms of orthodox Christian faith, as this is interpreted by the Catholic tradition within

[1] The *doppelganger* theme, drawn from a passage which both poets quote from Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, occupies a key position in both *The Cocktail Party* and Williams's novel *Descent into Hell* (1937).

the Church of England. But the roads whereby they reached this position were very different. Eliot's starting point was the Puritan tradition of New England; though we must not forget his interest in the idealist philosophy of Bradley, and his early studies in Sanskrit, and in Indian religious thought. Williams, on the other hand, passed through a more unusual, and perhaps a more dubious route. In his early years he was a member of the group of 'Rosicrucians' in London, known as the Order of the Golden Dawn, whose leader was MacGregor Mathers. This association of students of ceremonial magic, cabalism, alchemy and other occult subjects is of some importance for the literary history of the early years of this century. It is well known that, at a time before Williams's association with the Golden Dawn, Yeats was one of its prominent members. At a later time, members included Arthur Machen, and Algernon Blackwood, while the sinister figure of the 'black magician' Alistair Crowley crossed its path, and attempted, unsuccessfully to direct it to his own objects. Another member was A. E. Waite, the author of numerous voluminous and learned writings on occult subjects, including studies of the Cabala, and of the Holy Grail legend. These books, though written in a highly involved and obscure style, show considerable imaginative insight, and also a respect for historical scholarship decidedly uncommon in writers of this kind. They may certainly be read as source-books of many of Charles Williams's ideas. Waite was, in fact, in spite of the 'gnostic' tendency of his thought, a practising Anglo-Catholic; but it did not need his influence to point Williams, from the vague and sometimes trivial fantasies of occultism, towards the living tradition of Christian orthodoxy—for he had been brought up as a Churchman from boyhood.[1]

[1] Arthur Machen, another of his 'Golden Dawn' associates, was likewise an Anglo-Catholic. The source of some of the themes in Charles Williams's novels can be discerned in Machen's stories (notably *The Great Return*). But the heavy, slightly sickly tone of some of Machen's prose (as if redolent of stale incense), and the rather prurient reference to 'nameless evils', etc. is something quite foreign to Charles Williams.

Another important influence, was Williams's contact with the Christian mysticism of Evelyn Underhill, whose letters he edited (1943). It is notable that Miss Underhill's novel, *A Pillar of Dust*, is, in almost every respect, the model for Charles Williams's own writings of this kind. He also became friendly with the Roman Catholic poetess, Alice Meynell, who assisted him in finding a publisher for his first book of poems, *The Silver Stair* (1912).

His early interest in occultism explains much of the bizarreness (intriguing to some, repellent to others) of the machinery of Charles Williams's novels, and, more importantly, the difficult symbolism of his later poems. In particular, the idea that the various parts of the human body can be related to spiritual states (which is basic to the understanding of the 'Taliessin' poems) doubtless owes much to the Cabala. But as a poet, he employed these symbols, just as did Yeats, merely as they provided him with images for what he had to say. Everything in his work must be related to his basic orthodoxy, and in particular to his belief in the Incarnation. This doctrine implies a belief in the relevance, indeed in the dignity of the material creation, and in the possibility of its ultimate redemption. In the light of such beliefs no poet could lose his head, to the detriment of his art, among cloudy pseudo-mystical symbols.

There is also another element in Charles Williams's character, which must not be left out of account. This is a certain scepticism—what he called 'the quality of disbelief'. For him, doubt is something very close to faith—perhaps one might say, something to be included in faith—and he always emphasizes man's right, even duty, to question. In *The Descent of the Dove* (1939), which is a history of the operation of the Holy Spirit in Christendom, he gives an important and honourable place to Montaigne and to Voltaire. Of Montaigne he writes:

> Our Lord the Spirit, having permitted contrition to exist, permitted sheer intelligence to exist; he inspired—one may say so—Montaigne . . . He recalled men to the recollection that they began

with a hypothesis; that faith—the kind of faith he beheld active around him, which had (it was estimated) killed 800,000 human beings and wrecked nine towns and two hundred and fifty villages —*that* faith had first been a hypothesis and had been generally translated into the realms of certitude by anger and obstinacy and egotism. Even of profound spiritual experience the sentence that he put up in his library was true: 'Men are tormented by their opinions of things, not by the things themselves.' Thomas à Kempis had said it in another idiom: 'The Holy Ghost has delivered us from a multitude of opinions.'

And of Voltaire:

Voltaire seems actually to have thought on a low level; he did suppose that the fact that there were a thousand reputed Saviours of the world proved that there was no Saviour of the world, and that the different circumstances and natures of many mothers of many gods disproved the Virginity of the Mother of God. We know that neither affirmation nor denial are as simple as that. But in matters of public morals Voltaire shocked and justly shook the Church. The mechanical operation of cruelty which proceeded under the automatic rigour of the still officially Christian governments was halted, for a few brief moments, by the incredible energy of the old man of Ferney . . . Voltaire attacked in force and with a passion of sincerity: 'I will not laugh while such things are done.' He wrote across the brain of all future Christendom: '*Ecrasez l'Infame.*' Christendom will be unwise if ever she forgets that cry, for she will have lost touch with contrition once more. She had forgotten—or at least her rulers had forgotten—Man; the candles burned to the Incarnate, but the co-inherence of all men was being lost.

Again, in *He Came Down From Heaven* (1938), he characteristically lays emphasis on Mary's question immediately she received the message of the Annunciation: 'How shall these things be?' For him, this is a resumption, though on a new plane of experience, of Job's impassioned questioning of God in the Old Testament. 'Man was intended to argue with God, Humility has never consisted in not asking questions.' In private conversation he seems sometimes to have gone further. Thus, he is reported by Professor C. S. Lewis

to have said that, though he was ready to accept as revealed doctrine the proposition that existence is good, he added that it would never have occurred to him, unaided, to suspect it. On another occasion, it is said, he suggested that perhaps the individual, after death, might accept immortality as a 'final act of obedience'.

Thus, though in the main, Charles Williams may be regarded as belonging to the tradition of Christian transcendentalism in English poetry—the great tradition of Spenser, Vaughan, the later Wordsworth and Coleridge, and Coventry Patmore—there is also a sense in which he may be regarded as a Christian existentialist, almost as a Christian sceptic. He was one of the first, in this country, to realize the importance of Kierkegaard, and is reported to have been largely responsible for the Oxford University Press's issuing its series of translations of this thinker. 'To live in the unconditional', wrote Kierkegaard (Williams quotes this passage with approval), 'inhaling only the unconditional, is impossible to man; he perishes like the fish forced to live in the air. But, on the other hand, without relating himself to the unconditional man cannot, in the deepest sense, be said to "live".'

III

In the writings attributed to 'Dionysius the Areopagite', which form a fountain-head of the tradition of Christian mysticism, there are defined two ways by which the human soul may come to God. These are the Negative and the Affirmative ways. Viewed from the point of view of the former, God is defined in negative terms. He is to be reached by detaching the soul from love of all things that are not God—the things of the created world. This is the way of the Rejection of Images. But the Christian God is immanent as well as transcendent. Hence, everything in the created world is also an imperfect image of Him. The Way of Affirmation consists in the recognition of this, and in the

acceptance, in love, of all things, not for their own sake, but as images of the Divine. Charles Williams was fond of expressing this through the maxim of an ancient writer: 'This also is Thou: neither is this Thou.' This way, lived to the full, is not necessarily less hard than the Way of Rejection, for it will, sooner or later, involve the affirmation of the images of suffering and loss, along with the others.

In the historic Christian tradition (at least in the West) the emphasis has tended to be on the Negative way, rather than on its complement, the Way of Affirmation. This may possibly be due to the influence of monastic ideals, in the Middle Ages, and after. For the Negative is clearly a way that can most conveniently be taken by the cloistered contemplative. Perhaps its greatest exponent is St. John of the Cross, and in our own day, T. S. Eliot has expressed something of it in his later poetry, particularly the *Four Quartets*.

> I said to my soul, be still; wait without hope
> For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love
> For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
> But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.

But for Charles Williams the Way of Affirmation was pre-eminently the way of the poet, and of the lover—a way which all poets and lovers at least partially followed, whether they knew it or not. Even the verses of St. John of the Cross were a gesture of recognition made by the one way to the other. For the two ways are not mutually exclusive. In *The Figure of Beatrice* (1943) Williams says: 'The tangle of affirmation and rejection which is in each of us has to be drawn into some kind of pattern, and has so been drawn by all men who have ever lived.'

Among poets, he believed that Dante had most fully expressed one aspect of the Affirmative way, bringing it into relation with the ordered intellectual system of medieval Catholic theology. This following of the same way, along with the perversions of it into which the soul might be tempted, forms the central theme of Williams's own work.

The significance of this point of view, for the Christian thought of our time, must not be neglected. The traditional emphasis in Christian thought on the Negative way, to the exclusion of the Affirmative, may be traced to the historical influence of the monastic ideal. Monasticism arose as a result of the condition accompanying the breakdown of the Roman Empire. Men withdrew from the world for the sake of the world, in order to salvage, in safe refuges, something of the values which were everywhere being destroyed. We must be profoundly grateful that it was so. Today, European civilization is faced with a situation analogous to, yet also different from, that which heralded the approach of the Dark Ages. Perhaps once again it will be the task of the Christian Church to preserve for posterity our threatened values. But many believe that this can be done, not by a return to the monastic ideal, but by some organization of an essentially 'lay' kind, of Christians living and working in the world, yet under the law of Grace. In his poem *The Founding of the Company* (in *The Region of the Summer Stars*) Charles Williams tells of the creation of such a group, committed to the Affirmative way:

> Grounded in the Acts of the Throne and the pacts of the themes,
> it lived only by conceded recollection,
> having no decision, no vote or admission,
> but for the single vote that any soul
> took of its own election of the Way;
> the whole shaped no frame nor titular claim to place.
> As the king's name held the high lords
> in the kingdom's glory, so the Protection this,
> but this was of the commons and the whole manner of love,
> When love was fate to minds adult in love.
> What says the creed of the Trinity? *quicunque vult*;
> therefore its cult was the Trinity and the Flesh-taking
> and its rule as the making of man in the doctrine of largesse,
> and its vow as the telling, the singular and mutual confession
> of the indwelling, of the mansion and session of each in each.

The beginning of the soul's election of the Way lies in what Charles Williams termed the Romantic experience—a moment of vision, in which some image of the created universe is seen as embodying the transcendent Good. But Charles Williams's use of the term 'Romanticism' must be distinguished from the use of the word by some other modern writers. It does not, for him, mean an affirmation of emotional values to the exclusion of formal and intellectual ones, and not, certainly (as for T. E. Hulme) a denial of the essential limitations of human nature. At best, Charles Williams would have regarded these as inaccurate or imperfect statements of Romanticism—and 'Hell', he once wrote, 'is inaccurate'. The false romantic makes the mistake of regarding the romantic experience as meant for him, instead of him for it. The greatest false romantic was Milton's Satan.

IV

In a lecture which I heard him deliver at Oxford in 1943, Charles Williams distinguished five principal modes of the Romantic experience, or great images, which occur in poetry. They are:

(a) The Religious experience itself. Having posited this, Williams proposed to say nothing further about it. Obviously, in a sense, it is in a category apart, and includes the others.

(b) The Image of woman. Dante's *Divine Comedy* is the fullest expression of this mode, and its potential development.

(c) The Image of Nature. Of this Wordsworth in *The Prelude* (the actual subject of the lecture he was giving) was the great exponent.

(d) The Image of the City. Had Williams not been addressing an audience composed of English Literature students, I have no doubt that he would have cited Virgil, in the *Æneid*, as the great exponent. As it was, he pointed

to 'what were, until recently, known as our younger poets' as expressing, in their vision of the Unjust City, a negative aspect of this experience.[1]

(e) The experience of great art. Of this, Keats's *Ode on a Grecian Urn* was a partial expression.

The last of these modes, like the first, seems to stand in a special category. It is, it might be said, included by the others, just as the others are included in the first. And it also seems to me doubtful whether it could ever lead to a more than partial expression, without being subsumed in one of the others. Something further, however, must be said of these others, and of Charles Williams's interpretation of them.

In the first place, it will be seen that they are, psychologically, closely linked, especially as, in European poetry, Nature and the City are commonly personified as female figures. Dante's love for Beatrice was inextricably involved with his love for the city of Florence, and his ideal of the Empire. Wordsworth's attitude to nature is fundamentally that of a lover; he speaks of the great poem he planned, of which *The Prelude* was to be the first part, as 'spousal verse'. It is therefore impossible to treat of any one of these three great images in isolation.

Of Charles Williams's attitude to Nature, there is little which need be said. He greatly admired Wordsworth, and his essay on him in *Reason and Beauty in the Poetic Mind* (1933) is profound as well as sympathetic. Nevertheless, in his own poetry, Nature as such has hardly any part to play. His poetry lacks particularity of observation. Natural objects, in Charles Williams's poems, are always symbolic, stylized, even heraldic. Landscapes are always emblematic of states of mind. Thus the description of the wild scenery of Orkney in *Lamoracke and the Queen Morgause of Orkney*—very powerful in its way—serves only to externalize the undisciplined passion of Morgause and her lover:

[1] An even better, and positive, example from modern poetry would have been provided by Hart Crane's *The Bridge*, but Charles Williams had not read this poem.

> Caves and hollows in the crags were filled with the scream
> of seamews nesting and fleeting; the extreme theme
> of Logres rose in harsh cries and hungry storms,
> and there, hewn in a cleft, were hideous huge forms.

Perhaps his most important natural symbol is that of the Forest, which occurs in the 'Taliessin' poems as Broceliande. This forest may be interpreted in various ways—as the preconscious mind, as the perplexities of thought and decision through which we pass in this life. It is a place at once innocent and dangerous. But in Williams, it is primarily a literary symbol. Dante's '*selva oscura*', the forest of Shakespeare (in *As You Like it* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) and of Milton's *Comus*, Spenser's 'wandering wood', in which the Red Cross Knight encounters Error, and the forest of Keats's *Ode to a Nightingale*, are all parts of it:

> The forest itself has different names in different tongues—Westermain, Arden, Birnam, Broceliande; and in places there are separate trees named, such as that on the outskirts against which a young Northern poet saw a spectral Wanderer leaning, or, in the unexplored centre of which only rumours reach even poetry, Igdrasil of one myth, or the Tree of Knowledge and Life of another. So that indeed the whole earth seems to become this one enormous forest, and our longest and most stable civilizations are only clearings in the midst of it.[1]

If Charles Williams has little to say of Nature, his theory of Romantic Love is the very mainspring of his work. His beliefs on this subject are most completely set forth in *The Figure of Beatrice* (1943). But for their full understanding, one must have a wider acquaintance with his work, and particularly of his early poems, many of which are actual love-poems addressed to his wife.

The act of 'falling in love', as Charles Williams saw it, was a religious experience. To say this, is not simply to dignify a human emotion by bringing it into relation with a category expressive of the highest values. Williams's interpretation of love as a religious experience was both precise

[1] *The Figure of Beatrice.*

and literal. For the lover, at the moment of his first falling in love, the beloved was actually an image of the divine perfection. Dante saw Beatrice as such—as 'the youngest of the angels', a being of complete perfection. This does not abolish the 'real' Beatrice, the girl in Florence, who doubtless had many serious faults. But at his first meeting with her, described in the *Vita Nuova*, Dante sees Beatrice in the image of her perfection—as God sees her; that is, as she would have been, had there been no fall of Man, and as she may potentially be, when this image is restored to Heaven.

Charles Williams insists very strongly on the objectivity of this experience. Our modern psychological way of thinking, though it must perforce admit that such experiences do happen, would always tend to interpret by means of terms such as 'projection' and 'sublimation'. Williams will have nothing to do with this. Religious emotion is not sublimated, unconscious sex. Rather, every lover is, in some degree, whether consciously or not, a religious mystic. Furthermore, the experience is one of encounter. 'The most difficult thing in the world', he once said, 'is to realize that other people exist.' To treat the beloved as a mere instrument, as something upon which romantic emotion may be projected, is one of the most terrible dangers of the Way. This is illustrated in the novel, *Descent Into Hell* (1937). One of the characters of this story, the historian Lawrence Wentworth, whose final 'descent into hell' is the conclusion of the book, frustrated in his desire for a girl who does not love him, chooses instead an actual succubus in her image which, unlike her, is completely subservient to his will. He shuts himself up in his house, losing all interest in the real world, being completely absorbed by this auto-erotic activity. Finally, he refuses to recognize the real girl when, in a moment of terror, she comes to him for help. It is because it is an experience of encounter with another, essentially independent personality, that the initial ecstatic 'Beatrician moment' is only the beginning of the Way. The pattern has to be worked out in its fulness, and for each

human being this pattern will be different. But the challenge of experience will entail a further and more complex series of affirmations. For Dante this challenge lay in the marriage to another, and the subsequent death, of Beatrice. But the more usual pattern, at least today, would lead to marriage, and its responsibilities and problems.

There is, of course, much in common between this view of love, and that set forth by Plato in the *Symposium*. But the aim of the Platonic lover is to pass from the contemplation of phenomenal beauty in the person of the beloved to a purely intellectual and abstract ideal. Charles Williams's thought, however, is Christian, and not Platonist. The aim of the Way is not the exaltation of Eros to a transcendent plane, but its transformation into Agapē—Christian love within the framework of Christian marriage. Williams is bound by his belief in the Incarnation, which implies an affirmation of the importance of the particular, and of material experience. It may well be, as M. Denis de Rougemont has suggested, that the characteristic western view of Romantic love originated, among the Provençal troubadours, in heretical (Dualist) circles. But Dante brought what had hitherto been a purely secular ideal into harmony with the whole framework of medieval Catholic theology. This harmonization of Dante's Williams aimed to perpetuate, and to reinterpret for the world of today.

He did, in fact, write a book on the 'outlines of Romantic Theology', in which his ideas on the subject were set forth. It remained unpublished—partly, it seems, because authorities were doubtful about the propriety of its publication from a theological point of view. It will be remembered that Patmore's *Sponsa Dei*, a work of a similar nature, was for like reasons suppressed on the advice of Gerard Manley Hopkins. It is probable that we need not have any regrets about this, for such matters are better expounded in the language of poetry, than in that of discursive prose. Among Williams's poems, a group of early sonnets and other poems, in *Poems of Conformity* (1917), are important for giving

further insight into his ideas.[1] In these, a very close analogy is worked out between the experience of the individual lover and the events of the Incarnation, up to the Ascension. The latter represents the inevitable departure of Eros, after marriage. This departure is necessary in order that Agape, the Holy Spirit, may come.

V

If a recognition of his belief in the Incarnation is necessary for the understanding of Charles Williams's views on the nature of human love, the important place he gives to the image of the City is best referred to his belief in the doctrine of the Trinity. The God of Christians is not an Absolute of metaphysical abstraction, but a dynamic relationship of three Persons, united in one substance. This relationship is one of mutual love. It is also a hierarchical relationship, though each is co-equal and co-eternal. Since Man is made in the divine image, this pattern of co-inherence is realized more or less perfectly wherever on earth human beings exist in social relationship. Every manifestation of a just political order on earth is therefore in some degree an image of the divine order of Heaven, and the quest for a just society therefore becomes likewise a mode of the Affirmative Way. Virgil's ideal vision of Augustan Rome presents a version of this experience. It is, of course, perfectly true that Augustus's Rome was only in one respect the beneficent state, bringing peace and justice to the nations, which Virgil celebrated, and that its other aspect was exploitation and corruption. The realization of this contradiction would exactly correspond to a lover's discovery of discrepancy between his lady's base behaviour and his romantic vision of her. The latter experience is examined by Charles Williams in his criticism of Shakespeare's *Troilus and*

[1] The chapter on 'The Theology of Romantic Love' in *He Came Down from Heaven* (1938) should also be read.

Cressida (in *Reason and Beauty in the English Poetic Mind* (1933)) and in his poem, *The Coming of Palomides*.

> Division stretched between
> the queen's identity and the queen.
> Relation vanished though beauty stayed . . .

The same experience, in relation to the City, is partly the theme of *Taliessin on the Death of Virgil*, the basis of which is the tradition that Virgil, on his death-bed, asked that his *Æneid* might be destroyed.[1]

> Virgil fell from the edge of the world
> hurled by the thrust of Augustus' back; the shape
> he loved grew huge and black, loomed and pushed.
> The air rushed up; he fell
> into despair, into air's other.
> The hexameter's fulness now could find no ground;
> his mind, dizzily replete with the meaningless sweet sound,
> could found no Rome there on the joys of a noise,
> He fell through his moment's infinity
> (no man escapes), all the shapes of his labour,
> his infinite images, dropping pell-mell; above
> loomed the gruesome great buttocks of Augustus his love,
> his neighbour, infinitely large, infinitely small.

Virgil's final despair is interpreted as springing from his disillusion with the Empire, the perception of its negative aspect, symbolized by the 'gruesome great buttocks' of Augustus. Being a pagan, Virgil lacks the faith to see beyond the imperfect image to the reality behind it.

The image of the City, for Williams, can comprehend all human social groupings, whether large or small. He worked for most of his life in the London offices of the Oxford University Press. In the privately printed *Amen House Masques* (1927), charming *jeux d'esprit* written for performance at the Press's staff parties, he sees the office itself in this light, and the late Sir Humphrey Milford (then head of

[1] The same idea is the theme of Hermann Broch's novel, *The Death of Virgil*.

the Press) appears as Augustus Caesar. Charles Williams was a Londoner and he had a great love for the city of London. In his last novel, *All Hallows' Eve* (1945), there is a vision of London, which is seen as timeless, its whole historical past co-existing with its present in it:

> She saw a glowing and glimmering City, of which the life was visible as a roseal wonder within. The streets of it were first the streets of to-day, full of the business of to-day—shops, transport, men and women . . . Then, gently opening, she saw among those streets other streets . . . other Londons into which her own London opened or with which it was intermingled. No thought of confusion crossed her mind, it was all very greatly ordered, and when down a long street she saw, beyond the affairs of to-day, the movement of sedan-chairs and ancient dresses, and beyond them again, right in the distance and yet very close to her, the sun shining on armour, and sometimes a high battlemented gate, it was no phantasmagoria of a dream but precise actuality. She was (though she did not find the phrase) looking along time. Once or twice she thought she saw other streets, unrecognizable, with odd buildings and men and women in strange clothes, but these were rare glimpses and less clear, as if the future of that City only occasionally showed. Beyond all these streets, or sometimes for a moment seen in their midst, was forest and the gleam of marshland, and here and there a river, and once across such river a rude bridge, and once again a village of huts and men in skins. As she came down towards what was to her day the centre of the City, there was indeed a moment when all houses and streets vanished, and the forests rose all around her, and she was going down a rough causeway among the trees, for this was the place of London before London had begun to be, or perhaps after its long and noble history had ceased to be, and the trees grew over it, and a few late tribes still trod what remained of the old roads . . .
>
> It was not for her yet to know the greater mystery . . . In this City lay all—London and New York, Athens and Chicago, Paris and Rome and Jerusalem; it was that to which they lead in the lives of their citizens.

VI

It will be seen that Charles Williams's thought is based not on abstract premises but on the experience of human relationships—man's relationship to a personal God and to his fellow creatures, whether as individuals or in society. All such personal relationships involve sacrifice—a free giving to others of part of the personality—and exchange. The idea of exchange finds its supreme embodiment in Christ's giving of Himself as a sacrifice for Man's sin. But it is the type of all other relationships, including that of economics. This is brought out in the poem *Bors to Elayne: on the King's Coins*, which succeeds in embodying in strictly poetical terms the suggestion of an economic theory based on just values. The idea of exchange is also at the root of Williams's characteristic doctrine of Substitution—a doctrine which he seems to have intended quite literally and practically. I have not space to discuss this, his most daring, perhaps his most controversial doctrine, here in detail. It is best set forth in his novel, *Descent Into Hell* (1937), where it forms a major theme.[1] Pauline Anstruther, the heroine of this book, is troubled by a recurring terror—she is haunted by a *doppelganger*, or image of herself. She tells her fear to the poet Peter Stanhope (who is a *persona* of Williams himself). He tells her that he will 'carry' her fear for her, just as one might carry a parcel:

> 'When you go from here, when you're alone, when you think you'll be afraid, let me put myself in your place, and be afraid instead of you.' He sat up and leaned towards her. 'It's so easy,' he went on, 'easy for both of us. It needs only the art. For what can be simpler than for you to think to yourself that since I am there to be troubled instead of you, therefore you needn't be troubled? And what can be easier than for me to carry a little while a burden that isn't mine?'. . . .
>
> 'And if I could,' she said. 'If I could do—whatever it is you mean, would I? Would I push my burden on to anybody else?'

[1] And also in the chapter on 'The Practice of Substituted Love' in *He Came Down From Heaven*.

> 'Not if you insist on making a universe for yourself,' he answered. 'If you want to disobey and refuse the laws that are common to us all, if you want to live in pride and division and anger, you can. But if you will be part of the rest of us, live and laugh and be ashamed with us, then you must be content to be helped. You must give your burden up to someone else, and you must carry someone else's burden. I haven't made the universe and it isn't my fault. But I'm sure that this is a law of the universe, and not to give up your parcel is as much to rebel as not to carry another's. You'll find it quite easy if you let yourself do it.'

It is, he explains, the logical application of the injunction to 'bear one another's burdens'. By so doing, he is able to release her from her fear, but she in her turn must be ready to take upon herself another's suffering when the time comes. This happens when Pauline is granted a vision of one of her own ancestors, a Protestant martyr in the Marian persecution, in the agony of spirit which overcame him when he faced the stake. She takes this suffering upon herself, and he is enabled to go forward with faith to martyrdom, crying, 'I have seen the salvation of my God'. At the same moment, she once more beholds the *doppelganger*. But it now appears as her own self transfigured, and she is able, at last, to confront it without terror. 'He dead and she living were made one in peace. Her way was haunted no more.'

VII

A great deal of space has been given above to the exposition of Charles Williams's leading themes, because some knowledge of them is necessary for an understanding of his work as an imaginative writer. In the remainder of this essay it is proposed to touch upon his work as a novelist, a dramatist and, finally, as a poet, remembering that he was also critic, biographer, and lay theologian. In so doing, I hope to remain within the customary boundaries of literary criticism—calling attention to his imaginative and technical

achievement, rather than treating these works merely as vehicles of ideas, however important these ideas may be.

His novels, as has already been suggested, are, though perhaps the most widely read of his works, probably the least important. The kinds of theme that preoccupied him are hardly confinable within the terms of the 'serious' naturalistic novel—or at least, it would take the genius of Dostoievsky to make them so. His novels are entertainments, within that tradition of the supernatural romance already indicated. In this respect, he might be compared to Mr. Graham Greene, the best of whose novels, such as *Brighton Rock* and *The Power and the Glory*, are really conventional 'thrillers' adapted as vehicles of theological ideas. But Mr. Greene has a technical accomplishment as a fiction writer (he is whole-heartedly such, being embarrassed by no poetic genius) that Williams could not command; though, it may be suggested, Mr. Greene's religious thought exhibits a relative poverty besides the richness and subtlety of Williams's. The form which Williams chose was an artificial one. His dialogue, for instance, lacks realism. It is highly stylized, and sometimes falls into a certain preciosity which irritates many readers. There is also, perhaps, especially in his earlier novels, a certain tawdriness in the presentation of evil. *War in Heaven*, the first to be published (1930), makes use of the traditional paraphernalia of the witches' Sabbath and the Black Mass. But as he developed, he learnt to treat such matters with an increasing subtlety, and to present evil in a less sensational, and hence, far more terrifying manner.

The underlying theme of all his novels is the quest for some symbol of spiritual power. The good characters learn to humble themselves before it, submitting themselves to it, while others seek to pervert it to personal and selfish ends. This theme is presented most simply in *War in Heaven* which hence, though not the best, is in many ways the easiest to understand of Charles Williams's works. The quest is the traditional one for the Holy Grail; but the setting is contemporary England. The Grail is a chalice in a country church,

outwardly indistinguishable from any other chalice. The seekers include, on the one hand, an ordinary English archdeacon, a young poet, and the Duke of the North Ridings, a romantic Roman Catholic aristocrat; and on the other, a group of occultists, and Sir Giles Tumulty who represents the modern 'Faustian' intellect. Sir Giles is a traveller, scientist and anthropologist. Without any beliefs himself, he regards all religions as on a par with the primitive superstitions he has encountered on his travels. His one emotion is a consuming and wholly a-moral curiosity. This character is further developed in *Many Dimensions* (1931), the theme of which is Law—human, natural, and divine. Human law is embodied in the character of Lord Arglay, the Lord Chief Justice of England, who is now the opponent of the fundamentally lawless Sir Giles. Natural and divine law are represented by the Stone (once set in the crown of King Solomon) which is here the object of the quest. This stone will work miracles. By its aid, the categories of Time and Space can be transcended. It can be divided, and each piece retains all the properties of the whole. Yet though the subject of this novel is the miraculous, it is remarkable for the intellectual logic with which it is worked out. Sir Giles and his associates, having gained possession of the stone, carry out a series of scientific experiments with it. We are here almost in the world of H. G. Wells's early scientific romances. The stone is placed in the hands of a man condemned to be hanged, who is told to wish that he may not die. He does not, but having been hanged, remains alive and conscious, but horribly, his neck broken, and without the use of his bodily faculties. Another 'subject' is told, by means of the stone, to project himself into the past. This he does, but having done so, simply continues to live his past life up to the time when he made the wish, repeats it, and is once more projected back to the same point in the past, where the process continually recommences. He is imprisoned, as it were, in a closed tunnel of time, with no hope of escape. There is a working out of metaphysical

possibilities here, such as the author of *The Time Machine* did not envisage.

In *Shadows of Ecstasy* (1933) (written before *War in Heaven*, though published later) spiritual power is represented by the primitive magic of Africa, which the principal character, a white man, has mastered, and seeks to unleash for the destruction and domination of Europe. This is a prophetic book —for it anticipated, in a sense, the canalization of primitive, unconscious forces for evil ends which was to be achieved by Adolf Hitler, as well as certain movements among the natives of Africa itself at the present time.

In *The Greater Trumps* (1932) the leading symbolism is the images of the Tarot pack. These are the archetypal images, which various events and characters in the book are seen as embodying. It is characteristic of Charles Williams's capacity to see the eternal in the commonplace, that the Emperor card (signifying eternal law) is here represented by the figure of a policeman holding up the traffic. *The Place of the Lion* (1931), the most brilliant, perhaps, of the novels, also deals with the theme of archetypal images. The heroine, Damaris Tighe, is a young lecturer in philosophy. She has made a study of the history of the archetypes in neo-platonic and medieval thought. But her approach is purely academic and intellectual. She has never envisaged her subjects as being living forces of the imagination. In the book, a group of adepts succeed in drawing down these archetypal images into the phenomenal world. As they appear they assimilate their ectypes to themselves, so that the destruction of the phenomenal world is threatened. They also appear to individuals as evil or good, according as they have been imagined. Thus it is that the Eagle (representing intellect) appears to Damaris, because of her failure in imagination, as something hideous and obscene—a pterodactyl, in fact. The process is finally reversed by the hero, Anthony Durrant, repeating the act of Adam in 'naming the beasts'—that is, defining them by the particular qualities, and hence restoring the world as we know it.

Williams's last two novels, *Descent into Hell* (1937) (of which I have already outlined some of the main themes) and *All Hallows' Eve* (1945), are somewhat in a category apart. They are dark and difficult books, in which the sense of evil has become more oppressive, and the characters pass across the frontiers which separate the living and the dead. To break down these frontiers, as a final expression of his inordinate lust for power, is the object of Simon the Clerk in *All Hallows' Eve*. Clerk Simon is based on the figure of Simon Magus, the traditional founder of the Gnostic heresies, and is also an Anti-Christ figure. He has imposed himself on his followers, who blasphemously accord him the title of 'Our Father' as a spiritual leader. He is certainly the most powerfully drawn, and the most wholly evil, of all the characters in Williams's novels. But the two principal characters of the book have already crossed the frontier Simon is trying to break through. They are Lester Furnivall and Evelyn Mercer, two young girls, killed in an air-raid on London during the war. The story is thus seen not from the point of view of the living, but of the dead. The two girls exist in some kind of intermediate state, just beyond death. But they progress to sanctity or damnation in accordance with the laws of their own characters, formed during life.

VIII

It will be seen that Williams's novels, in proportion as they become more serious, tend to push their subject-matter beyond the limits where the novelistic conventions can contain it. In the field of poetic drama, he was freer to be an innovator and experimenter in technique. His earlier plays, like his early lyric poems, have something of an air of pastiche about them. But the best of his later plays are wholly original, and will (it may prove) furnish many hints to younger writers who are seeking to grapple with the still unsolved problem of re-creating a living poetic drama.

The starting point of Williams's mature work in the drama is the same as Mr. Eliot's: a church festival drama, to be staged within a ritualistic framework. *Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury* (1936) immediately invites comparison with *Murder in the Cathedral*. Both were written for the Canterbury festival, and have a similar subject—the martyrdom of the protagonist. *Cranmer*, however, is more original in technique, allowing for a much wider presentation of the historical forces involved, and is further removed from naturalism. The greater complexity of the play is made necessary by the character of the hero. Cranmer's historical personality was more complicated than that of Becket. Becket's struggle with Henry II could be represented as a straightforward clash between spiritual and temporal power, and his martyrdom signalizes his final victory over the king. Cranmer, on the other hand, sought, up to the very last, to temporize with the secular power. The climax of his tragedy is his final acceptance of the suffering, which his character, naturally humane and gentle, shrank from. This acceptance is symbolized, in the play, by the figure of the Skeleton, who partly acts as chorus. The Skeleton at first seems to represent evil, but is finally seen as the dark, reverse face of God. The Skeleton thus addresses Cranmer before his martyrdom:

> I am Christ's back; I without face or breath,
> life in death, death in life,
> each a strife with, each a socket for, each,
> in the twisted tear of good will, backward
> -running speech,
> the derision that issues from doctrines of grace
> through the division man makes between him
> and his place.
> Christ laughs his foes to scorn, his angels he charges
> with folly; ah, happy who feel how the scorn enlarges!
> I am the thing that lives in the midst of the bones,
> that (seems it) thrives upon moans, the thing with no face
> that spins through the brain on the edge of a spectral voice.
> Rejoice, Son of Man, rejoice. . . .

In his novels, Charles Williams was sometimes tempted to represent evil in a melodramatic fashion. In his plays, in the figure of the Skeleton, the Accuser in *Judgment at Chelmsford* (1939), and the Third King in *Seed of Adam* (1948), it is much more subtly treated. The Accuser suggests the Satan of the Book of Job; he is God's minister, not His opponent. This series of characters may be said to culminate in the Flame in *The House of the Octopus* (1945), who represents the Holy Spirit watching over and guiding the Church.

All these plays of Williams are religious dramas, written for groups of church actors. But they are far removed from the sentimental conventions of the run of 'religious drama' (which he is once said to have humorously described as 'women with pitchers at wells'). Williams held that the religious dramatist must discover 'those images of human experience in which the desired religious design can be so achieved poetically that what is "palpable" to us is the poetic and not the religious purpose'. *Seed of Adam* is a nativity play; yet it is the most original in technique of all his plays. In it, the ordinary categories of time and space are abolished, and the Nativity is depicted as an eternal, symbolic event. Adam is also Augustus Caesar. His numbering of his subjects is the desperate attempt of fallen man to overcome his limitation through exact knowledge. The first two Kings, the Tzar of Caucasia and the Sultan of Baghdad, represent human material and imaginative power respectively. The Third King (the one traditionally represented in iconography as an Ethiop) is the core of the apple which Adam ate. With him he brings his 'little mother Myrrh', Hell, the worm in the core of the apple. She is a negress, who threatens to devour all. Only Mary can accept, and offers herself in love. Her birth pangs are represented by Hell's attacking Mary with her scimitar. But Mary breaks into the Magnificat till even Hell herself is compelled to join in the words 'and Holy is His name!'

Judgment at Chelmsford (1939) is another example of Williams's power to transform what might be dead and

conventional into something organic and exciting. It is a pageant play, written to celebrate the centenary of the foundation of the diocese of Chelmsford. It is so designed that small groups of actors from separate parishes may each present scenes of local history within an over-all framework. Nothing might be expected to be more banal or formless. As it is, the formal unity of the play is magnificent. The allegorical figure of Chelmsford comes to take her place beside the great sees of Christendom, but is met at the gates of Heaven by the Accuser. The series of historical scenes is then unfolded, moving backwards in time but in a logical progression probably suggested by Dante's *Commedia*. First is shown the limbo of modern life, then the inferno of Matthew Hopkins, the early seventeenth-century 'witch finder', and the Essex witches. We move to a purgatorio, whose climax is the martyrdom of the Abbess Osyth by the Danes, and hence to a paradiso represented by the legendary marriage of St. Helena of Colchester to Constantius Chlorus, father of Constantine the Great, which symbolizes the ideal union of Church and City. The play ends with St. Helena's pilgrimage to Jerusalem, and her finding of the True Cross.

IX

I come now to Charles Williams's sequence of poems on the Arthurian legend, *Taliessin through Logres* (1938) and *The Region of the Summer Stars* (1944). It is on these, I believe, that any claim for him to rank as a major writer must finally rest. This is not the place to attempt a detailed examination of these complex and often obscure poems. The reader is referred to Professor C. S. Lewis's valuable commentary, included, with Williams's unfinished prose study of the Arthurian legend, in *Arthurian Torso* (1948). I may perhaps be able to indicate their place in the tradition of English poetry, and touch upon some of their leading themes.

The 'Matter of Britain' has, of course, ever since the

Renaissance, continually suggested itself to English poets as the ideal subject for epic treatment. It is known that Milton, Dryden and Wordsworth all at one period of their careers contemplated an Arthuriad. But the only major poet, finally, to tackle the subject was Tennyson. Yet the *Idylls of the King*, though better than most modern critics will allow, are not the epic poem which Tennyson probably planned. For all their charm, they are remote and unreal; the characters are sentimentalized—especially when we think of the almost Homeric directness of Malory—and the morality is commonplace. A modern poet, attempting the same subject-matter, must first of all free himself from the Neo-Gothic and Pre-Raphaelite associations which inevitably spring to mind when the names of Arthur, Lancelot, Galahad, and the rest are mentioned. This Charles Williams has done; he has gone behind the sham medievalism of Tennyson, and even the genuine medievalism of Malory (who still remains, however, his chief source)[1] and created a world which is completely his own. It is partly a world of timeless poetic symbolism like that of Blake's prophetic books, partly the world of the sixth century A.D., the world of the Byzantine empire, in which the historical Arthur is believed to have lived. In the preface to *The Region of the Summer Stars* (1944), Williams writes: 'Logres is Britain regarded as a province of the Empire with its centre at Byzantium. The time historically is after the conversion of the Empire to Christianity but during the expectation of the Return of Our Lord (The Parousia).' It is this last which is, in fact, the central theme of the poems. It is signalized by the coming of the Grail. But owing to the breakdown of unity—the treachery of Mordred, the civil war between Lancelot and Arthur (owing to the former's adultery with Guinevere)—the historical process is reversed. 'Logres is overthrown and afterwards becomes the historical Britain, in which the myth of its origin remains.'

[1] He had, however, also read widely in the earlier sources of the Arthurian Legend, including the Welsh *Mabinogion*.

The symbolism of the poems is further explicated by the end-paper design to *Taliessin through Logres*. Here the Empire is represented as a human figure. The head is in Logres (Britain) for it is in Britain that the myth is to be enacted, and the historical process become conscious and articulate. The breasts are in Gaul (where Christendom is nourished by the milk of learning and culture). The hands, at Rome, symbolize the manual acts of the Pope, which are the acts of the Church (blessing, laying on of hands, etc.). Byzantium, the seat of the Emperor (who, Williams tells us, is to be regarded as Operative Providence), is the navel—traditionally the seat of the soul. Jerusalem is the genital organs—the place both of Crucifixion and Redemption. At the furthest remove from Logres (but nearest to Byzantium) is Caucasia, the buttocks—this represents the natural, but still essentially good, human functions. Beyond the Empire, to the east and south, is the antipodean empire of P'o l'u, where order gives way to anarchy. P'o l'u is not, Williams warns us, formal Hell, yet it perhaps represents as much of Hell as the finite human mind can conceive. To the west is Broceliande, which is both a forest and a sea, and beyond this Sarras the Land of the Trinity, to which the Grail finally departs.[1] Broceliande, of which I have already had something to say, roughly represents the Unconscious (in Jung's sense). Its ruler is Nimue, the Lady of the Lake—who is the great goddess of Nature. On its confines is Carbonek, the castle where the Grail and the sacred Spear are kept. This is the castle of King Pelles, the father of Helayue, who becomes by Lancelot, the mother of Galahad. The establishment of Logres is due both to the Empire (the command of the Emperor) and to the powers of Broceliande—Merlin and Brisen (the twin offspring of Nimue), who are Time and Place, prophetically considered.

[1] Readers of Blake may find it helpful to equate the poetic geography of Charles Williams with Blake's 'States'. There is an almost exact correspondence between Sarras and Eden, Broceliande and Beulah, Albion and Logres, and P'o l'u and Ulro.

Within Logres itself, the working out of the myth is seen through the eyes of Taliessin, the king's poet. He represents the poetic imagination and is a *persona* of the author. He is 'druid-born' but has become Christian. An early poem (not included in the two series I am considering) tells us of his visit to Byzantium to request the Emperor to establish the kingdom of Logres. He is in love with Dindrane, the sister of Percivale, but they are separated, for she enters Religion. She represents the Negative Way, as he the Affirmative. In contrast to Taliessin is the Saracen knight Palomides, who is connected with mathematics as Taliessin with poetry, and is the rejected lover of Iseult. He is in pursuit of the questing beast, one of Williams's subtle images of Evil. The beast appears at the moment when Palomides becomes conscious of the discrepancy between his ideal image of Iseult and her human imperfection.

> I heard the squeak of the questing beast,
> where it scratched itself in the blank between
> The queen's substance and the queen.

The beast leads Palomides into a sterile region, which has been compared to Eliot's *Waste Land*:

> When I came out of the cave the sky had turned,
> I have climbed since down a dead mountain,
> over fossils of space in the petrifaction of time,
> by the track at the slant-eyes' edge in this city of
> astrologers

Here he learns to accept his own failure, and goes to be baptized:

> it was true I should look a fool before everyone;
> why not look a fool before everyone?

In the three poems relating to Palomides Williams explores a sceptical, intellectual consciousness which contrasts sharply with his 'Romanticism', but is of importance in estimating his work as a whole.

These themes (and others) are peripheral to the main one —the quest of the Grail. Galahad, who achieves it, and reaches Sarras, and the three other knights who are granted a sight

of it, Percivale, Lancelot and Bors, like Blake's Four Zoas, partly represent the human faculties—spiritual, intellectual, emotional and physical. More importantly they are four ways of love—divine, virginal, romantic yet sinful, and ordinary married love. Bors is connected with economics and the providing of food. In *The Calling of Arthur*, where Arthur, at Merlin's (prophetic Time's) calling, overthrows the effete tyranny of King Cradlemas, and establishes the kingdom, we are told:

> Bors is up; his wife Elayne behind him
> mends the farms, gets food from Gaul; the south
> is up with hammer and sickle and holds Thames mouth . . .

When we remember that the poem was written in the thirties, the hammer and sickle reference must not be missed.

Taliessin through Logres forms a series of lyrics, written in different stanza forms, making a very original use of internal rhyme and alliteration. These poems belong to the tradition of the Ode rather than the Epic. The poems in *The Region of the Summer Stars* are described as 'generally . . . incidental to the main theme'. They are in the nature of straightforward narrative or monologue, and hence, once the symbolism of the earlier sequence has been grasped, are easier to understand. Charles Williams never really solved the problem of presenting a direct narrative in contemporary poetic terms (but I do not think *any* modern poet has solved this problem), but some of his dramatic monologues, notably *The Meditation of Mordred*, are remarkably effective.

> The nit-witted wittols of worldly wisdom tear
> their throats at the abolition of the Byzantine tribute,
> now the coined dragons stay in their pockets at home.
> Kin to kin presently, children; I too am a dragon.
> My father dwelled on the thought of the Grail for his luck,
> but I can manage without such fairy mechanism.
> If it does prove to be, which is no likely thought,
> I will send my own dozen of knights to pull it in.
> My cooks would be glad of such a cauldron of Ceridwen
> To stand by their fires—magic . . .

It is no accident that Charles Williams, like Yeats, but independently, seized upon the image of Byzantium to express the City. It was the union of sensuous colour with geometrical and abstract form in the subsumption of art and life into ritual, in the historical art of Byzantium, which attracted both poets. Williams's poetry may perhaps best be understood in terms of that art. It is non-naturalistic, mathematical and ritualistic. He never attempts particularities of descriptions of nature, or of human character. Yet human emotion is profoundly explored in his work. When we first open the Taliessin poems, it is like entering a Byzantine cathedral. We are dazzled by the profusion of colour and ornament, and at the same time, it may be, chilled by the apparent inhumanity of the figures which confront us. But as we become accustomed, we begin to see the magnitude of the structure, and the deeper humanity which is conveyed by the formalism of portraitures. And above all, everything is subordinated to one great design. It is the final purpose of all art—to praise:

> The organic body sang together,
> the acts of identity adored the Lord
> the song sprang and rang in Byzantium . . .
>
> Bless him in Caucasia, bless him in Lateran
> bless him in the blazons of London-in-Logres,
> bless him, praise him, magnify him for ever;
>
> if there be worlds of language beyond Logres,
> bless him, praise him, magnify him for ever;
> if there be any wit in the rolling mass of waters,
> if any regimen in marshes beyond P'o l'u,
> if any measurement among the headless places,
> bless him, praise him, magnify him for ever.

To me, at any rate, such articulation is that of a major poet.

CHARLES WILLIAMS

A Bibliography by Linden Huddlestone

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